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CASTE IN INDIA

BY J. H. PORTER

When caste in an inchoate form issued from overcrowding within limited areas, spontaneous social segregation, and race and religious antagonisms, a priesthood, recently become dominant, took advantage of it at once, systematized its restrictions, and declared its laws to be revelations from heaven. There was nothing national or ethnic in this action. It was the natural and obvious policy of a usurping order, seeking to strengthen a position it was unable to maintain by force. Persistent efforts to the same end were made in Persia and Egypt, but unsuccessfully.

Vedantism did not lend itself to ecclesiastical encroachments. Brahmanism, on the contrary, rested upon the supremacy of a priestly class, as did that Hinduism by which it was followed. To the first caste was unknown, while both the latter supported it with all the power they could command.

Practically Buddhism was a revolt against caste tyranny. In this respect it finally failed. While the church in India maintained itself no alteration of abstract doctrine could affect formal observances. Caste outlived the jar and conflict of nations and creeds, the wreck of theologies, and the transformation of gods. It still lives, while the principles of Sākya Muni are taught at Banāras and when the Neo-Brahmanism of Sankarāchārya, in so far as it can be said to possess any religious vitality, has derived it from Buddhism.

Caste was invincible except to an assault which would overthrow the order whose interests were involved in its existence. The results of causes operating toward that end have been here traced in general outlines.

Freed from myths and traditions, conflicting views, the intricacies of state papers, and those technicalities which obscure Sanskrit codes, caste organization is seen to put an end to all we consider essential to liberty and happiness, prosperity or progress. It is the most memorable, comprehensive, and suc-

cessful attempt ever made by an order to oppress humanity in its own interests. Its enactments broke up the race into fragments never to be reunited, separating Aryans from other peoples by impassable barriers, permanently fixing their occupations, interests, associations, and aspirations. As men were born, so must they remain. Their course of life was prescribed, their places after death predetermined. Of the four castes, three were formed from the conquering race, *Brāhmanas*, a priesthood; then *Kshatriyas*, warriors, and *Vaisyas*, herdsmen in the first place, afterward farmers. These last two existed chiefly for the benefit of the first. As for the fourth, *Sūdras*, they were those "slave bands of black descent" (*varna* meant both caste and color), the remnant of a native population (*Dāsas*), whom our worthy ancestors had not slaughtered when they took possession of their property. Those Dravidian and Kolarian peoples who remained unconquered and still occupied three-fourths of India when these revelations concerning them came down from heaven, were dogs and devils, given up to eternal reprobation.

The sacred text treats of caste distinctions as follows: "In order to protect this universe He, the most resplendent one, assigned (to men) separate duties and occupations. * * * To *Brāhmanas* he assigned teaching and studying" [the *Veda*, *sruti*, or revelation], "sacrificing for their own benefit and that of others; giving and receiving alms."* These avocations and offices were limited to the "twice born"—Aryans who came into the world naturally, as men, and had a second birth through initiation into the number of those that might be saved. *Sūdras* and the rest—aborigines, out-castes, Pariahs—were not men, but as beasts that perish, to be taught nothing and given nothing; likewise nothing could be accepted from them. On the other hand, "the very birth of a *Brāhmana* is an eternal incarnation of the sacred law." By divine right he is a member of all courts, an assessor or judge in every case. It is his province to settle disputed points, to impose penances, to perform rites essential to salvation. He sanctified the companies into which he came. To resist his will was mortal sin; to defame him, sacrilege; to strike him, death. "Let the first part of a *Brāhmana*'s name denote something auspicious * * * the second part of a *Brāh-*

* C. i, v. 87, 91, 95.

mana's name shall be a word implying happiness." But with a Sûdra, "the first part must express something contemptible," and the second part "be an expression denoting service."* A member of the priestly caste could not be executed. "All other castes shall suffer capital punishment," but "no greater sin is known on earth than killing a Brâhmana. A king must therefore not even conceive in his mind the thought of killing a Brâhmana. * * * Let him never slay a Brâhmana, though he has committed all possible crimes."† There is no need for him to be "uselessly active with his hands or feet." Gifts to a Brâhmana are meritorious, and if he wants anything let him take it. "A Brâhmana coming into existence is born as the highest on earth, the lord of all created beings. * * * Whatever exists in the world is the property of the Brâhmana. * * * The Brâhmana eats but his own food, wears but his own apparel, bestows but his own in alms; other mortals exist through the benevolence of the Brâhmana."‡ He might not "give the leavings of his meal to a hungry Sûdra," and if even a "twice-born" man listen to his instructions without permission, "he shall sink into hell."

"One occupation only the Lord prescribed for the Sûdra, to serve meekly."§ "A wealthy Brâhmana shall compassionately support both a Kshatriya and a Vaisya if they are distressed," but not "make initiated men of the twice-born castes against their will do the work of slaves. A Sûdra, whether bought or unbought, he may compel to do servile work, for he was created by the Self-existent (Svaya-mbhû) to be the slave of a Brâhmana. * * * Though emancipated by his master, he is not released from servitude; since that is innate in him, who can set him free from it."||

This and much more to the same effect by those who traded in all human needs and necessities from the hour of birth until a man's ashes mingled with those of his funeral pile. No such system can come into existence immediately, but the priesthood taught that it descended from on high to the prophets in a com-

* C. ii, v. 31, 32.

† C. viii, 379, 380, 381.

‡ C. i, v. 99, 100, 101.

§ C. i, v. 87.

|| C. viii, v. 413, 414.

pleted form. Brahmanism, however, began when a section of the pastoral Aryans, rent from their kinsmen in the region of the modern Kahnates, probably by some ritualistic schism, burst into the Punjab. India has no secular history of ancient times, but her religious records in some measure make good this deficiency. From them we learn that in those days the head of each family was father, chief, and priest; that in every tribe its leader stood in like relations toward the whole aggregate. On the occurrence of public sacrifices whose efficacy depended upon a strict adherence to traditional rites it was found that this aggregate was very frequently at fault. They understood fighting better than sacred services, and as it was of the last importance that these should be performed correctly, some householder who knew the rubric was selected as a celebrant. Such men grew into permanent sacrificers and priests; their functions became hereditary; they founded families which were the repositories of a knowledge that the laity had forgotten. Such groups developed into classes, and finally consolidated as a caste. The Brâhmanas' position depended upon their attainments. Schools were founded to preserve and propagate sacred learning, and in time they inevitably differed, so that their names, taken from those of great teachers (Apastâmba, Gautama, Baudhyâna, and so on), really represent separate codes whose revelations (*Sruti*) and traditions (*Smriti*) are not the same.

With a caste organization the priesthood found means to increase their power by recasting scholastic systems, changing and adding to the injunctions they contained, and adapting them more perfectly to their own advantage. Such Dharma-Sûtras (laws of duty) were declared to be obligatory upon all "twice-born" men and issued as direct utterances of the Almighty—"He who is indiscernible and eternal." Enough of those works survive to show the process described, but that great canonical Manu-Smriti quoted, and which is known throughout the world as "The Laws of Manu," was taken from a Mânava Dharma-Sûtra that has perished.

In early days, however, if Aryas had souls to be saved, they had also battles to fight. Priests claimed that victory was granted through their intercession; soldiers said it was won by their swords. The parties clashed; both claimed the spoils, and they fought for precedence in long, fierce wars whose history is lost

and of which all we know is that the Brâhmanas won. It was to this success that the caste system owes its existence, while those claims, restrictions, and penalties it contained necessarily led to the formation of sub-castes, sections, and out-castes. A sage saturated with sanctity could not do as a warrior might, nor the latter do what was proper for an agriculturist. Many things that *must* be done and which men *will* do under all circumstances were unlawful for any Aryan.

Caste, however, never became effective in the ideal form in which it was promulgated, nor was it so widely diffused as people generally suppose. Nevertheless this incubus crushed progress and public spirit out of unnumbered millions and stood undestroyed amidst shocks such as no similar system ever sustained. Wars of conquest overwhelmed it in infancy, maturity, and old age, and its form arose again. Scythian and Greek, Arab, Persian, Pathan, and Mongol, Sikh and Englishman, destroyed and changed, while this endured. The religion of which it was the keystone passed from nature worship through Vedantic doctrinalism into the base idolatries of Hinduism, and caste remained. Buddhism, which is before all else a protestation against its tyranny, converted one-third of the earth's inhabitants and became extinct in India, leaving caste unchanged. Reformers and heresiarchs, with innumerable followings, renounced its authority, but proselytes came in upon all sides to take their places. Christianity and Mohammedanism assailed caste unsuccessfully. Human nature revolted against it in vain.

Now its last barriers are breaking down. During the more tranquil ages succeeding Aryan invasion the warrior class lost its former individuality; the old Vasaiya assumed the character of a modern husbandman. Theoretically these castes persisted, but practically they faded slowly and insensibly away. Members of powerful Kshatriya families had at all times made their way into the Brahmanical order, and the descendants of rich farmers were adopted into the military class, but such permutations availed nothing against that suppressive power by which they were opposed; neither did they touch the distinction existing between the highest and lowest. That last impassable gulf is being bridged, but not by organized effort of any kind.

People who in anywise appreciate the importance of great events do not attempt to foretell their consequences; that depart-

ment of prophecy is appropriated by men of a different stamp. If, however, we can neither foresee such results in their fullness nor estimate the respective values of those factors by which they were brought about, nothing prevents us from recognizing existing facts, and perhaps the most important of these in India is what Sir Alfred Lyell calls "the gradual Brahmanizing of the aboriginal, non-Aryan, or casteless tribes." It may seem at first sight that the conversion of outsiders and opponents into adherents tends to strengthen this institution; that to accelerate and increase transitions heretofore inconspicuous would build up the system instead of breaking it down. No such metamorphosis, however, as that of Sûdra masses into "twice-born" men can take place otherwise than destructively. This is obvious, and it accounts for an anomalous feature of those periods when it was impossible, namely, that caste, before senile atrophy enfeebled it, remained apparently unaffected by national convulsions of all kinds. Those great resolvers which bring about reconstruction by affording an opportunity for elements of change which have accumulated imperceptibly to coalesce and display themselves under distinctive forms left it untouched. While the classification made by sacred law of casteless men with "elephants, horses, and despicable barbarians" represented a living principle, the distinction between Sûdra and Brâhmana, wide as that between man and beast, might be maintained; but how could this be possible while the priesthood were receiving the former among Aryans in multitudes?

This is but comparatively lately the case, and the fact witnesses to a decay of the religious order, not to its development. In days of old Dâsas had no rights; they could acquire none, so far as the dominant caste was concerned, except through its indifferentism and loss of power. Even when the Aryas were comparatively newcomers in the Punjab and their intolerance was still intense, the institutes of their law were violated under the influence of expediency. All Dravidians and Kolarians were accursed, but some native tribes were more powerful than others, and a process of compromise began. Political associations and alliances paved the way to a more intimate union, and certain families of aboriginal race pretended to be Rajputs and their claims were allowed. That wreck and confusion inseparable on both sides from protracted war afforded an opportunity

to go back to periods when genealogies became obscure and uncertain. These haughty warriors, who professed to be of royal descent, would have scorned to mix their blood with that of such canaille as their former enemies. The aspirants for that honor, of which there were only individual examples, had therefore to prove a fictitious extraction, nor under the circumstances was this very difficult. A Brahman priest was always at hand to forge a pedigree, invent a family miracle connected with the locality where the tribe settled, and receive the head of a group and his descendants into the fold set apart for "twice-born" Aryas. Not then would a patrician whose line went back *de tout jamais* give his daughter to such an upstart. With his grandsons, however, it was different. The posterity of such people contracted marriages with girls of pure lineage or with the higher class of manufactured Rajputs.

This may be regarded as the first step toward obliterating race distinctions and removing caste obstructions. In "the Middle Land" or Bengal, where this system crystallized, but where also ancient institutions were most corroded and changed through time and a struggle for existence that bore heavily upon overcrowded areas, transitions like the above took place not only in separate instances, but *en bloc*. Sections of native clans or entire tribes gave in their adherence to some Hindu sect, became Vaishnabs, Ramayats, and the like, lost their tribal name, and often their language. Whether there was any intermixture of blood in such cases depended upon local circumstances. These increments soon became indistinguishable, except in physical type, from the Aryans. They worshipped a new set of gods in the old spirit, and were speedily swallowed up among surrounding throngs.

Gradual conversion likewise aided in making good the losses continually taking place through heresy and schism. As was said, it was always impossible to carry out the sacred law literally. Contact, self-interest, and the indifference attaching to a change of faith where nothing is altered but a name, facilitated the movement, and in India, as throughout the East, ritualism is more than religion, and the latter stands instead of nationality. New aggregates were formed by this kind of interstitial change who did not need to account for their origin, whereas where masses went over, priestly aid was essential in order to show that

these aborigines were in reality ancient Aryan septs which had been occulted amidst the storms of past times.

Such is caste, and such were the principal means by which it was modified. How obstructive and destructive it has been; what secret springs of progress have aided in the amelioration of that complex and wonderfully contrasted society it has so long controlled, and how long its influence may yet be felt it is not attempted to say. India has done great things, despite her thwarted energies and arrested growth, much greater than the world in general knows, and whatever is latent within her is now exposed to the quickening influence of Western culture. The new birth will be in a period far removed from ours, but in the meantime her actual accomplishments, what she has suffered, and how her afflictions were sustained may be studied with advantage.
